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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature related to stepfamilies in general, focusing on the stressors that affect the children of White, middle-class stepfamilies; the related consequences of the stressors; and strategies to cope with the impact of the stressors. Following this general review, the paper focuses on the identified stressors which affect children of African American stepfamilies, looking at the impact of "mundane extreme environmental stress" or, in the case of African American stepchildren, the impact of enduring racial prejudice on a daily basis as an added stress to the African American child in a stepfamily. It is suggested that stepfamily members set realistic expectations of themselves, that they take advantage of the opportunity to develop new relationships within the family, and that stepparents make an effort to understand their children's feelings and concerns. It is noted that the development of courteous relations with the ex-spouse facilitates the management of the sharing of children's time and results in fewer problems for all the parties involved, and that the participation in social support groups, which provides the opportunity to share frustrations, challenges, triumphs, and other feelings with persons who have been in similar situations, has proven to be an effective way of coping with many of the stresses involved in stepfamilies. (NB)

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Stressors Affecting Children of African-American Stepfamilies

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Running Head: STRESSORS AFFECTING CHILDREN

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Abstract

This concept paper reviews the literature that focuses on the identified stressors which affect children of African-American stepfamilies, their resulting consequences, and some strategies to cope with the impact of these stressors.

Stressors Affecting Children of African-American Stepfamilies

The number of traditional nuclear families is diminishing at a significant rate, while the number of single parent families and stepfamilies is increasing at an alarming rate. The image of a traditional nuclear family, consisting of two biological parents and their child(ren), is believed to be normal and desirable culturally, socially, and psychologically (Anderson & White, 1986; Rappaport, 1977). However, it is no longer the normative family structure in our society.

Findings from Visher and Visher (1982) indicated that if the current trends of that time continued as predicted, the number of families consisting of single parent families and stepfamilies would increase to 45% by 1990. Relatedly, McGoldrick and Carter (1980) predicted that one in six children would live in stepfamilies.

As the number of divorces in this country continues to increase, so will the number of remarriages. Unfortunately, remarriage families are not necessarily more stable than first-marriage families. Research by Hayes and Hayes (1986) revealed a 40% divorce rate for second marriages in 1977. Data from the National Center for Health Statistics (1987) indicated that there has been a 60% increase since 1980 in marriages involving single men and divorced women. Correspondingly,

there has been a 50% increase in marriages involving single women and divorced men. Further, marriages involving two previously divorced adults almost doubled. Bernstein (1989) reported that slightly more than half of all couples have children at the time of a divorce, accounting for more than 1.2 million children whose parents divorce each year. Presently, there are 35-40 million adults who are stepparents. Extrapolating from these figures, Glick (1984) estimated that approximately one-third of all children will encounter a divorce before reaching the age of eighteen, and when separations that are not formalized by divorce are included, this figure jumps to two in five. Glick (1984) went on to predict that approximately one child in four will grow up having more than two parents. As we approach the 21st century, it is unlikely that there will be any significant changes in the above-mentioned trends.

These findings have prompted many researchers to declare that the traditional nuclear family is progressively becoming an endangered institution. Needless to say, while still revering the traditional family as the ideal family structure, we, as a society, must take a close look at the aforementioned alternative forms of family structure (i.e., single parent families and stepfamilies) as viable vehicles in which to socialize our children.

This paper reviews the literature related to stepfamilies in general, focusing on the stressors that affect the children of white, middle-class stepfamilies, the related consequences of the same stressors, and strategies to cope with the impact of the same stressors. Further, this paper focuses on the stressors affecting children of African-American stepfamilies and the above-mentioned related issues in particular.

Given the magnitude of the number of remarriages and the number of family members they eventually effect, and granted that the stepfamily as a family structure will probably remain a viable avenue for the socialization of our children, it seems appropriate to examine the factors that lead to problems in stepfamilies and that lead to the increased likelihood of disruption to the stepfamily structure, as compared to the traditional nuclear family structure.

Stressors Affecting Children of White, Middle-Class Families

Visher and Visher (1983) reported that many couples go into a remarriage expecting the impossible of each other and the rest of the family. Stepmothers try to be super-moms in an attempt to overcome the "wicked stepmother" image. Stepfathers rush in and try to take command immediately. Stepchildren protest in resentment at being forced to participate in this new venture on which they do not have a vote.

Ex-spouses may compete for the love and loyalty of their children. Finally, grandparents and other extended family members may feel closed out and ambiguous about their roles. In light of the above-mentioned backdrop, it is quite understandable why remarried families experience problems.

Further, Visher and Visher (1983) went on to enumerate tensions and stresses that arise from the particular inherent conditions which set stepfamilies apart from traditional nuclear families, as follows:

1. Adults and children have experienced important losses;
2. Adults and children all come with past family histories;
3. Parent-child bonds predate the couple's relationship;
4. There is a biological parent elsewhere;
5. Children are often member of two households; and
6. Family members are at different points in their individual life cycles.

An Additional Stressor Which Affects Children of African-American Stepfamilies

While it is commonly believed that the aforementioned stressors affect all stepfamilies, notwithstanding race, color, or ethnicity, McAdoo (1983) reported that being a member of a minority group such as African-American, nonetheless, means being treated differently, and this societal stressor places huge demands on family life for

African-American family members, be they involved in a traditional nuclear family, single parent family, or stepfamily structure.

Therefore, as regards African-American families, an additional stressor is invoked to better understand the plight of African-American nuclear families in general; and African-American stepfamilies in particular. McAdoo (1983) elaborated on one specific stressor, as follows:

7. The impact of "mundane extreme environmental stress" (Pierce, 1975).

Borrowing a term that has an anthropological origin, Pierce (1975) has compared the stress placed on African-Americans in the United States with the harsh physical stress placed on those who live in extreme climates - just as the Eskimo people in the Arctic must cope with day-to-day severe cold and scarce food supply, African-Americans must endure racial prejudice on a daily basis. However, in this case the extreme environment is not a physical, geographic one, but a social one, which has a psychological impact. The "mundane extreme environmental stress" which society imposes on African-Americans results in many problems. For the African-American stepfamily, when considering the aforementioned stresses that most stepfamilies already face, the resulting problems can only be markedly greater.

Unfortunately, the number of studies that have researched the impact of stressors affecting children of African-American stepfamilies is somewhat insignificant. Indeed, a literature search of Psychological Abstracts over the past twenty years revealed no research articles addressing these issues as they pertain to the African-American stepfamily.

Hence, one is forced to extrapolate from data that utilize children of white, middle-class stepfamilies as the subject of study. A review of the findings from studies that examine the consequences of marital disruption and subsequent remarriage on white, middle-class stepfamilies revealed a number of recurring results that have received much support from varied researchers.

Resulting Consequences of Stressors Affecting the Children of Stepfamilies

1. A number of remarriages do not succeed, and children are exposed to disruption again; data from the National Survey of Children (NCS, 1981) revealed that approximately 1 child in 10 will undergo two or more family disruptions before reaching the age of 16 (Furstenberg, 1988);

2. Evidence from the NSC suggests that the continued involvement of the outside parent in child care generally does not conflict with the establishment of a stepfamily; however, the picture was quite

different for children living with stepmothers as compared to stepfathers. Relations were less satisfactory for stepmothers, perhaps, because of the special circumstances that led to the father to receive custody (e.g., the biological mother may have been determined to be unfit as a parent or may have abandoned the family) (Furstenberg, 1988;

3. The NSC revealed that there was a low level of contact between the noncustodial parent and child. Interestingly enough, the prevailing pattern resembled a system of child swapping (i.e., biological fathers move out of the home and are usually replaced by stepfathers, and the outside biological fathers in turn establish a new household in which they may share responsibility for their new partner's children) (Furstenberg, 1988);

4. The NSC data suggest that there is little conscious effort on the part of divorced parents to collaborate on child care - parallel parenting prevails over co-parenting (Furstenberg, 1988);

5. Both boys an girls in stepfamilies demonstrated more behavioral problems than children in nondivorced families (Bray, 1988);

6. There appears to be differential adjustment for boys and girls in stepfamilies. Boys seem to benefit from having a stepfather in the family as reflected in increased intellectual performance and less life stress, although they had the most behavior problems. In contrast, girls reported

poorer intellectual performance and more life stress than boys in stepfamilies (Bray, 1988)

7. Children adjusted better when the biological mother plays the primary parental role and the stepfather plays a less active role with the children (Bray, 1988);

8. Stepmother-stepdaughter relationships were found to be more problematic than stepmother-stepson relationships (Brand et all., 1988);

9. Stepfather-stepdaughter relationships were found to be more problematic than stepfather-stepson relationships (Brand et al., 1988); and

10. Inspite of the above-stated findings, Bray (1988) found that children from stepfamilies do not suffer from self-esteem problems relative to children from nondivorced families.

In summary, although there are many causalities in remarriages, overall, preliminary research from many sources indicate that many children develop reasonably close attachments to their stepparents and most stepfamilies function rather well (Furstenberg, 1988). While one can not make these same conclusions with any degree of certainty when discussing African-American stepfamilies, one can only speculate that the aforementioned findings may be, more or less, applicable to these stepfamilies as well.

Strategies to Cope with Stress Endemic to African-American Stepfamilies at the Familial Level

While most of the below-mentioned strategies come from studies that utilized children of white, middle-class stepfamilies as the focus of study, they, nonetheless, may have relevance for children of African-American stepfamilies. They are as follows:

1. It is of utmost importance that stepfamily members set realistic expectations of themselves. It is unrealistic to expect stepfamily members to be just like a tight-knit biological family and to expect that every member will instantly love all the others. Stepfamilies fare better when recognizing that there are genuine differences between biological families and them. Therefore, the development of realistic expectations about stepfamily life is a key element to the successful development of good relationships in stepfamilies (Visher and Visher, 1983);

2. Stepfamily members should take advantage of the opportunity to develop new relationships within the family. New and rewarding different relationships may provide an additional source of support (Visher and Visher, 1983);

3. It is important that parents make an effort to understand their children's feelings and concerns. Oftentimes the children's emotional pain or negative behavior in response to the new family structure can be

either avoided or effectively resolved when parents are aware of and sensitive to their children's feelings and fears (Visher and Visher, 1983);

4. The development of courteous relations with the ex-spouse facilitates the management of the sharing of children's time and results in fewer problems for all the parties involved. In short, when children are not caught up in the crossfire of battle between fighting biological parents and when basic custody and visitation issues are resolved, the potential for emotional upheaval in the involved children is reduced (Visher and Visher, 1983); and

5. The participation in social support groups, which provide the opportunity to share frustrations, challenges, triumphs, and other feelings with persons who have been in similar situations, has proved to be an effective way of coping with many of the stresses involved in stepfamilies (Visher and Visher, 1983).

Strategies to Cope with Stress Endemic to African-American Stepfamilies at the Societal Level

1. The development and provision of educational courses, involving issues particular to stepfamilies, for family members of stepfamilies;

2. The requiring of community and social service agency employees, that work with stepfamilies, to take educational courses or

attend workshops to expand their knowledge of the special conditions particular to stepfamilies;

3. The funding of research activities that study stepfamily issues, particularly those that relate to African-American stepfamilies, that will yield further knowledge about the special conditions and circumstances particular to these stepfamilies;

4. The enactment of federal and state legislation that would promote the end of discrimination and racism against African-Americans; and

5. Relatedly, the enactment of laws or policies that promote the increased probability of harmonious relations among stepfamily members and noncustodial parents and agency workers. For example, the development of the rights of stepparents (Visher and Visher, 1983).

Conclusions

The rising number of stepfamilies in the United States today suggests that schools, social service agencies, human service employees, counselors, and other professionals that work with children and their families are seen and will continue to see more stepfamilies in carrying out their job duties and responsibilities. Further, policymakers must plan to meet the special needs of this group. Of note, a significant portion of this group will come from individuals of African-American

ancestry. Therefore, concerted efforts should be exerted to study more closely and thoroughly the needs of children of African-American stepfamilies in order to adequately and appropriately respond to those same needs. This paper has only begun to scratch the surface in an attempt to bring attention to complex issues surrounding the children of African-American stepfamilies. Indeed, further research to unravel the complexities of these complicated issues is indicated.

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